

STAT

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A15THE WASHINGTON POST
7 March 1980*Stephen S. Rosenfeld*
Hard Going

The dirty little secret about American foreign policy that the presidential candidates are reluctant to admit is that it is all going to be hard—very hard—from here on out. The United States has lost the cushion of superiority that both drew it into excesses and allowed it to pass through to the other side. We are now living on the margin where, like all other nations, we must ration our resources and commitments and pay for our mistakes.

The candidates are not saying anything very close to this at all. In their varying ways—John Anderson perhaps least—they are invoking an older, cozier notion of a special providence watching over the United States, of an American uniqueness and a special mission in the world. "Let's make America great again," declares Ronald Reagan in what is merely the most characteristic rhetoric in this vein.

Not by accident did Jimmy Carter leap to identify himself with the victorious American hockey team. Across the country and, in truth, in front of my television set, there were heard explosions of nationalistic joy. On the screen you could see the players' raised fingers wagging "No. 1." The camera caught a spectator exulting that "America rules!"

Politically, the most expansive expression of American strategic nonchalance surely lies in the Carter "doctrine" by which the president staked out a whole new region in which the United States might decide to use force according to its own lights.

I happen to feel that some such "doctrine" makes sense—if it is accompanied by effective non-military approaches to the vulnerabilities created by our dependence on Middle East oil. Yet it was telling how heavily Edward Kennedy's critique of the Carter doctrine traded on the expectation that no circumstances would arise in which the United States would or should fight for oil. The hidden premise, again, is that God, or something, will spare us such disagreeable choices.

But I am not so troubled these days by the shibboleths of the left, since the political tide appears to be running the other way. My worry is that, having done much of what the critics of the left encouraged us to do, we will now do much of what the critics of the right are urging, and end up without the gains considered commensurate with the cost.

The defining quality of the right is the kind of contingencies it chooses to plan for. Its preferred risks are those with a large Soviet component, so that someone—Moscow—can be held to account, and so that counter-pressure can be applied at a remote point if it is unfeasible to apply at a near one.

Okay. Let's be strong. Some of us may feel a bit more the masters of our fate if we are, and the muscle may actually be useful, in deterrence or defense, in particular circumstances. But suppose we had already spent the extra \$120 billion or \$150 billion we now propose to lay out for the Pentagon over the next five years. How would that better fit us to deal with events in 1) Iran 2) Afghanistan 3) Colombia? Would we have achieved more strategic and political stability, if not a mellower tone, in relations with the Soviet Union?

Carter has lost the handle on American foreign policy. His major negotiations and causes are at best on hold. Mostly he is now reacting to events without imposing order or design of his own. He has a weak secretary of state, a bumptious national security adviser, an excessively technocratic secretary of defense and an intelligence chief who inspires little confidence. In these conditions, the 1980 elections, far

from being an interruption, provide a welcome occasion for retooling personnel and rethinking policy, even, or especially, if Carter wins. He is no longer the captive either of his 1976 constituency or, he says, of his own previous judgments about international affairs, and he remains in the running notwithstanding his frustrations in the White House.

We put a heavy burden on our leaders. This is exactly as it should be. It is not that they are wise to make grand promises of restoring American power and influence—promises they cannot deliver on. It is that the more modest but still valuable gains in security and control that are there to be made are precisely those attainable through good presidential management. I cannot believe, for instance, that Carter's was the only way to deal with Congress on his energy program. Or that the damage done by the United Nations vote fiasco was unavoidable. And so on.

It is going to be very hard. We have to be smarter, tougher, more careful and a whole lot less self-deceiving.